

Scandalous mercy

Today's readings bring together two extraordinary passages of scripture: the story of the prophet Jonah, complete with vomiting whale; and Jesus' parable of the labourers in the vineyard and the crazy landowner who paid his workers the same whether they worked all day or only an hour. Just how fast would the shareholders have sacked him?? Well, right at the outset I want to acknowledge Brother Richard of Taizé, the author of the short book, *'Opening the Treasure of the Scriptures – some biblical crumbs'*. I heard him speak back in August at Taizé and bought his book. His insight into these two stories is eye-popping.

First, let's recap the story of Jonah. It's set some 800 years before Christ. God calls Jonah to go and preach a message to the people of the city of Nineveh in Assyria, because they are so wicked that God was going to destroy them. Here's what another prophet, Nahum, had to say about them: *'city of bloodshed, utterly deceitful, full of booty, with no end to the plunder'* (Nahum 3:1). Jonah will have none of it, he fears they will repent and God will have mercy on them! He boards a ship to try and run away from God going from Joppa in Israel, to Tarshish, in Spain. There is a huge storm, and in the end the sailors chuck Jonah overboard to try and appease God who sent the storm. The storm dies down and Jonah is swallowed by a huge fish (traditionally a whale). He spends 3 days in the fish's belly before praying to God from within the fish (see? nowhere is safe!) and the fish promptly spews him up onto dry land. And God tells him again, go and preach to the Ninevites! This time he does, and the people of Nineveh repent, complete with sackcloth and ashes. And God relents, changes his mind – he's not going to destroy them after all. Jonah was right – God is that forgiving. He is appalled at God's mercy for Nineveh, Israel's enemy, and he despairs that he helped this to happen: *'It is better for me to die than to live'* he says (Jonah 4:3).

It's true to say that there is quite a lot of exaggeration and hyperbole in this short book. We can think of the book as more like a parable – it conveys something which is profoundly true, and the story is a way of expressing that, just like the parables of Jesus. The story of the big fish makes the story unforgettable! And leads us to go digging to find what is really going on here.

But, and it is a huge but, although the people of Nineveh did repent of their wickedness, half a century later in 722 BC, Assyria waged war on Israel and destroyed Samaria, capital of its northern part. Their change of heart was short-lived. Here's the thing. The book of Jonah was written some 400 years *after* these events, when it was known that ultimately, Jonah's mission was fruitless, a failure. Why would someone sit down and write this? And how come it finds its way into holy scripture? The message seems to be so that the Jewish people, and ultimately we too can understand that the mercy of God is scandalously generous: the Ninevites were shown mercy, even though in the end they trashed it (did God know that would happen? Or not? Or just that it was a possibility?). Such is the mercy of God. And poor Jonah ends up being an actor in the story of the calamity which fell on his own country by proclaiming the message he did. The scandalous mercy of God.

Jesus had special esteem for the prophet Jonah. He promised *'the sign of Jonah'*, the opposite of an announcement of victory where Israel would triumph over its enemies. *'For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the son of man will be to this generation...the people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah; and see, something greater than Jonah is here'* (Luke 11:30,32). It is a scandal as great as the scandalous message of the book of Jonah. Like that of Jonah, the proclamation of Jesus will result in the salvation of the enemies of the people of God...is mercy dangerous?

Turning now to the gospel reading in Matthew 20, we find the strange parable of the labourers in the field. In this parable, labourers line up through the day to work in the landowner's field – but they all get paid the same, whether they worked through the heat of day, or just clocked an hour's work at the end. In this story, the landowner does no harm to anyone – but there is an impression of injustice. Someone has imagined how the story might have continued – the next morning, when the boss went out in search of workers, no-one turned up! Here we have generosity as dangerous for the economy, not just national security!

In both the story of Jonah and the parable of the labourers and the landowner, the normal rules of justice and mercy are exceeded. It's not normal. Who would go to your sworn enemy hoping for them to repent, knowing that it's probably all going to be thrown back in your face? Or who pays the same for one hour's work as for a whole day? Underlying these two stories is what we might call a superabundance of mercy, of grace, of justice: but a new kind of

justice, where those who don't deserve it under 'the old rules' get the same as everyone else. This principle is seen in many stories and acts of Jesus: think of the story of the prodigal son where the party is held for the returning wastrel who has trashed half of the family's fortune. Think of Jesus' welcoming of Levi, the scumbag tax collector, and his appointment as the apostle Matthew, writer of today's gospel reading; of Saul the Christian-slayer, become Paul the apostle – and so on. These are the new rules of the kingdom of heaven which designates any place in heaven or earth where God already reigns. Wherever justice and mercy overflow, the reign of God is beginning.

We can find the same principle at work in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' manifesto for the Kingdom, where he tells us that we, as his followers, are called to reflect exactly that scandalous mercy. In this chunk of Matthew's gospel in chapter 5, Jesus takes some commandments of the law and expands them into the superabundance of mercy and justice characteristic of the Kingdom. For example, *"You have heard that it was said, 'an eye for eye, and tooth for tooth' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."* (Matthew 5:38-42). An *'eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth'* has the principle of *equivalence* in it – if you break one of my teeth, I break one of yours. Fair enough – as far as it goes. Except who stops there? Jesus then goes on to give the preposterous, implausible advice about turning the other cheek, don't retaliate at all. The result? You get two slaps instead of one and maybe it stops there. But – there's the possibility that your offering of the other cheek disconcerts the aggressor to such an extent that he hesitates for a moment and the 'normal' chain of violence is interrupted for a moment. A breach is opened up, and something unexpected can happen. This is superabundant justice, mercy, grace. It is the Kingdom. Jesus isn't saying this as a command, but as an invitation to creativity, a proposal, to break the chain of violence. Think of Gandhi, think of Martin Luther King Jr. and you can see this principle in action. And see the results.

Last week at church, In answer to Peter's question about how many times should I forgive someone? we heard the parable of the unforgiving servant, the man who was forgiven of his unpayable, limitless debt by his master, but who squandered the mercy he was shown when he went and wrung a few measly pounds out of someone who owed him a pittance (Matthew 18:23-35). He ended up in hell. Hell may indeed be a present reality for those who do not learn that lesson. In Children's Praise last week we talked about this parable and I asked the children what it would feel like if their parents didn't forgive them for something bad they had done. One of the boys (it was all boys last week!) said, *'it will be hostile'*. He was right. The exact opposite of the superabundant mercy and justice of the Kingdom.

Early on in the church's history, the scandalous mercy of the Kingdom was recognised as a problem. When the Emperor Constantine – who was no saint – became a Christian in the 4th century AD, a contemporary historian, Zosimus, wrote: *'Constantine was accused of having committed a crime so serious that no pagan priest had wanted to raise him up from it; among Christians, on the other hand, he was promised forgiveness of his sins'*

We have travelled from Jonah, suspicious of the mercy of God, worried about what it might lead to. Linked today in the lectionary with the parable of the labourers in the field, where the generous but unhinged landowner gave the same pay to his workers whether they worked for 5 minutes or 5 hours. Considered the scandal of mercy, the superabundance of justice which leans away from retribution and towards forgiveness and restoration in the Sermon on the Mount. How does this sit with us? Of course, in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we have the supreme example of scandalous mercy that is at the very core of our Christian faith.

I will end by directly quoting Brother Richard: *'This teaching of Jesus is at the same time luminous and scandalous. What is more beautiful than the generosity of God who excludes no-one from his generosity? But his kindness is also a scandal. Why does he not put an end to the doings of the wicked and the unrighteous? Faithful to his own boundless mercy, he prefers to take risks as Jesus taught his disciples....Mercy causes real or perceived injustices. But God dares to show mercy dangerously, for he has in view the salvation of all people. The mercy of God, which cost him dearly, obtained the salvation of the world. And it can happen that the mercy of his children, which exposes them to danger and sometimes leads to injustice, obtains what is just where justice alone could not'*

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